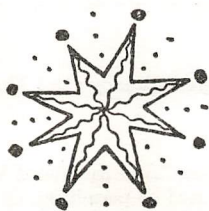


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# THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS



by J. ROBERT WATT

Theology Library  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
AT CLAREMONT  
California

THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

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To  
Verna  
*Judy, John, Robert, and James*  
who  
share  
His way

## Preface

~~Christmas~~  
The mood of the ~~Advent~~ season is always one of expectancy. We look forward to celebrating the coming of Christ, ~~and to singing:~~

~~Joy to the world! the Lord is come:~~

~~Let earth receive her King,~~

~~It was always there in our home.~~ What small  
child ~~we~~ could ever forget the deep and often mysterious wonder of Christmas? As we grew older our minds,

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

so many times, went back to try to pierce the original thought and experience of the shepherds, the wise men, and even of Mary and Joseph.

The wise men from the East following the star were always fascinating. Who were they? How deep was their experience!

Curiously, there were thousands who did not see the star. Maybe they were too busy in their shops with their own affairs. Possibly it had never occurred to them to look up.

<sup>we</sup> offer this <sup>Service</sup> ~~service~~ with the prayer that it may help us to look up, for life is never the same again when we follow the star to such a manger. May it open up for us the meaning of the Incarnation—that in the twentieth century we too might behold, not only what God has done, but what he is doing.

~~These chapters were originally given as part of the morning worship in Trinity United Church, Toronto. Situated in the heart of a great city alongside one of the world's leading universities, this church welcomes to its services each Sunday persons from the Orient, Europe, Africa, the United States, and Canada. These messages were directed to their deepest needs.~~

## PREFACE

In the dramatic, ~~well-nigh~~ incredible tidings committed to us—~~that~~ the living God has invaded history, with power and great glory—<sup>here</sup> lies the hope of the human race. It is this gospel <sup>that our service</sup> ~~which these~~ <sup>will</sup> ~~chapters~~ endeavor to reveal.

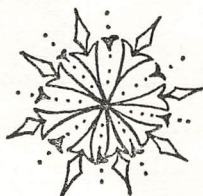
~~To my own congregation who constantly express simple gratitude for the ministry of the spoken Word, I give my thanks.~~

~~I would like also to thank Miss Irene Lund, who typed the manuscript for publication, and Mrs. J. Hart, my secretary, who typed it in its original form.~~

J. ROBERT WATT

## Contents

Prologue .....	13
1. The Star of Light .....	22
2. The Star of Hope .....	33
3. The Star of Rejoicing .....	44
4. The Star of Love .....	54
Epilogue .....	68



## Prologue

It is an old, old story. It happened long ago and far away. It's the story of shepherds on a hill, of wise men wending their way from afar. It's the story of a song, and it's the story of a star. We hear it again and again, wherever we go, whoever we are. It haunts us still, filling our hearts with an aching tenderness, and even, at times, with a stabbing uneasiness. We cannot escape it. We would not if we could.



## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

It is night. A man trudges along under the stars. By his side a tired donkey carries a young woman. Her body is bent with fatigue, her face gray with weariness. The journey is almost over, and none too soon! Just one more hill to descend. Barking dogs tell them the town is below. X O L: H Mc

They stop at an inn, the only refuge for travelers that night in crowded Bethlehem. With a word the man tries to comfort his wife, then strides toward the door. As he opens it, light leaps out engulfing the wan figure, bringing with it a rush of babble from within. As the door closes behind him, darkness fills the courtyard where the woman waits in the stillness of the night.

The innkeeper looks at the tired traveler. "Sorry no room."

"But, sir," the man pleads, "we have traveled many, many days, and I must have a room, particularly for my wife this night."

"Sorry," replies the innkeeper, "there is no room. Your wife would have no privacy here. We are crowded out."

Joseph turns, sagging as though in a stupor, and makes his way toward the door. As his hand touches the latch, a servant catches up with him. "Friend,

I'm sorry, but the innkeeper is right." And, hesitatingly, "There is a place—if your wife won't mind. I know where I can fix a place and make it clean. You will have it quiet there, too, and it will be warm." X (2) Away in Morn

And so it was that night that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

Yes, it is an old, old story. And yet how new and real for us, for here is the eternal parable of the soul, even yours and mine. And how we need again to hear it—to study it!

A man said not long ago, "What's right with Christmas?" And thoughtful people today realize that there is much that is wrong with our observance of it. When business persuaders—both hidden and open—move into high gear, we wonder if the true meaning of the season isn't smothered by advertising and merchandise.

For us a journey to Bethlehem is not easy. Many things clutter up the starlit highway which our spirits should be traveling these days. We hear it said that we should keep Christ in Christmas. Let

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

us realize that he is always in Christmas. Let us be sure that we keep ourselves in Christmas. ~~X~~ ③

As Christians we believe that Christ will continue to reveal because he still makes clear to ordinary people in the atomic age that they are in the hands of a living God. *It came*

If we want Christ in Christmas, let us make our celebration for Christ. Here we are face to face with what we might call the Christian tragedy. This need not be, though it actually often is. It is simply the fact that many professing Christians fail to understand the meaning of a God who at Bethlehem came down to earth to seek and to save that which is lost. So few really face up to the far-reaching implication of the Incarnation.

The gospel of Christmas therefore presents an uncomfortable challenge to all who want to sit comfortably. It declares that God has come very near to us, as near as our homes, as near as a woman's pain, as near as the cry of a troubled child, as near as the tears of a sorry thief—and as near as the cross itself.

Here is the reality for which men's souls are seeking, for it tells the story of actual happenings. Bethlehem is a place on the map, but Bethlehem



is also a condition of the soul. Jesus was born in a body, with skin on his face, and he breathed. Yes, and today he is born with a body, with skin on his face, and he breathes in us when we accept him—wherever we reveal him. Christ enables us through the power of the living God who sent him to rise above those things which so easily beset us. He releases unto us the power of a presence which frees us from the things which would otherwise imprison us. X (4) 1st Noel

Norman Vincent Peale tells a story about A. J. Cronin, who began his life as a doctor of medicine, but later gave this up because he felt so strongly the urge to write. At medical school he had assisted one of the brilliant surgeons of London. This surgeon was rather nervous and impatient, and Cronin, as a young interne, was perhaps a bit clumsy. They never got along well, and the surgeon would often say to Cronin with contempt, "You will never be a surgeon." From this man's criticism Cronin acquired a doubt of his own ability, and although he graduated well up in his class this doubt never left him.

The time came when he went up to the western highlands of Scotland to practice his profession.

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

Whenever any patient needed even the simplest surgery Cronin would send him to Perth or Edinburgh. Although he gave out pills, as he put it, he was afraid to do that for which he had been especially trained—to use the surgeon's knife.

Near Christmastime one year, when the countryside lay buried beneath the snows of winter, an accident occurred. The son of a local minister had been crushed by a falling tree. No vehicle could travel the roads, so Dr. Cronin walked the three miles to the minister's house.

He examined the unconscious boy and found his legs paralyzed. Then he discovered the cause of the difficulty—four crushed vertebrae. He recognized the need for one of the most delicate of operations. He tried to telephone for help, but the lines were down. He learned that the railway traffic had been blocked by snow. No help could come to him. Finally he said to the family, "I can't do anything for you. I can't get a surgeon."

The country preacher said to him, "Doctor, under these circumstances, you will have to operate yourself. God will help you."

"It's impossible," Cronin explained. "This is one

of the most delicate operations in the field of surgery. I can't do it."

The preacher repeated, "You must do it. God will help you."

So Cronin called in a highland nurse, sent the family from the room, swabbed the injured area with antiseptic, and took up the scalpel. His hand trembled, for he could see the face of his old teacher and hear his sneering comment, "You will never make a surgeon."

Then something welled up inside Dr. Cronin. Maybe it was anger; maybe it was the flickering spark of faith. The face of the teacher was replaced in his mind by the face of the preacher, and in his ears were the words, "God will help you." Later, as Cronin related it to a friend, he said:

My hand grew steady; my mind grew cool. I felt confidence in myself. I made the incision, for now I worked with only the sense of touch, putting together those crushed vertebrae, knowing all the time that the boy's life was in my hands, literally.

At the end of that hour I saw the boy's lower limbs move freely. I could have cried for joy, and the greatest experience of my life was when I walked into that

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

room and said to the family, "I think he'll do." I was set free from my fears.

Is that not what God does for us when we meet him? Is that not what is meant by the words:

The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.

When we throw open the doors of our hearts and allow his love to move through us and his light to shine, there his will and his work can be done. There we shall find something. We shall discover that the Christ of the crib is the Christ of the carpenter's bench, and that the Christ of the carpenter's bench is the Christ of the cross and of the empty tomb. We shall find that he is still alive, that we can be alive, that he can be alive in us and through us, imperfect though we are. Where there is faith and the willingness to enter again into the miracle of Christmas, there the light of the royal radiance of the Son of God shall be reflected.

There were many people involved in the Christmas story. There were shepherds. There was the innkeeper. There were the servants of the inn. There was Herod. And, of course, there were three

wise men from the East who came searching for an answer to the strange riddle posed by the star itself. They sought fulfillment for a hunger. They sought wisdom for minds that were open and alert to what God would reveal.

Let us now probe more deeply into the message of Christmas—and see if we might not ourselves be filled with that radiance which flooded the lives of those who knelt there. Let us follow in the footsteps of the wise men. Let us behold the star as it reveals, so that we too might ultimately find our way to the old inn door, and there throw open our hearts and make room for him who came so that the radiance of Bethlehem might flood our lives.

\* (5)  
Joy to world





# 1

## The Star of Light

*"When the fulness of the time was come,  
God sent forth his son." (Gal. 4:4.)*

X In Matthew's account of the Christmas story the star is a principal factor. "There came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." (2: 1-2.) Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascer-

tained what time the star had appeared, and as the wise men searched, the star which they had seen in the east went before them. So important is the star that a Christmas scene is hardly complete without it.

In what sense can the star be for us a symbol of what happened at Bethlehem? After all a light does not exist merely to be seen. It illumines.

Here is revealed more fully than anywhere else the naked truth—that in the Babe of Bethlehem God stepped out of eternity into time to become the instrument of redemption. Into the darkness of this world he came. Into the darkness of our world he continues to come, calling us as he called the wise men to come apart from the world and to behold that “the fulness of the time was come.”

Light looked down and beheld Darkness

“Thither will I go,” said Light.

. . . . .

So came the Light and shone.

No hostile force, no blind stupidity, no human hate can overcome the saving love he has for us. Here in all fullness God reveals a place where he meets us when we turn aside to seek him. In a

world of danger and dread, shadowed by sin, do we recognize what our great need actually is and what is really taking place?

Donald Macleod in *Notable Sermons from Protestant Pulpits* tells of the young sea captain in Maxwell Anderson's play *Wingless Victory* who had sailed from Salem, Massachusetts, about 1800. Seven years later he returned, laden with riches from the Far East, bringing with him a lovely bride, a princess of Malaya. Instead of the heart-warming reception which she had been expecting, his friends and his relatives were forbidding and cold. They raised a wall of prejudice, intolerance, and social cruelty. Although the young woman had abandoned her former superstitions and tribal customs and had embraced the religion of her husband, the townsfolk kept her out of their circle. Finally, breaking under the strain, she decided to take her own life, and as the curtain falls she cries, "God of the children, God of the lesser children of the earth, the black, the brown, the unclean, the vengeful, you are mine now as when I was a child. He came too soon, this Christ of Peace; men are not ready yet."

Was humanity ready for the coming of Christ? Or did he come before we were ready to receive him? We are aware that curious crowds are always waiting, waiting for something to happen. There are those people, sick in mind, who wait even for tragedy to strike. But aside from these people, did Jesus come too soon? Had the fullness of time really come?

In the light of the cross we might say he did come too soon, and if 2,000 years ago was too soon, then what about our time? Does the law of the jungle still prevail, only now covered with modern tinsel? Are we any more ready for a gospel which teaches us to deny ourselves in order to realize life's fullness?

Dr. Macleod goes on to say:

Surely we would be forced to say: "He came too soon, this Christ of Peace; men are not ready yet!" Too soon to teach men that the road to humility is the way to spiritual leadership, power, and victory. Too soon to convince men that self-renunciation is the way to lasting success and moral maturity. Too soon to advise braggart men and belligerent nations that enslavement of others is treachery against the sanctity of the human soul, and deserves the wrathful vengeance of God.

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

Yes, if you and I were in charge we might say with our limited wisdom and knowledge that it was too soon. Fortunately for us, we are not the ones responsible. Paul said, "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son." God, therefore, must have felt that the time was ready, and the time is ready.

Dr. James Stewart expressed it this way in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*:

There is a tide in the affairs of God; and it is when that tide reaches the flood, when all the preparatory work is done and world conditions are clamoring for it and human souls are open, it is then, at the flood-tide hour of history, that God launches <sup>a</sup> ~~(his)~~ new adventure.

Bethlehem was the place, and the writer of the fourth Gospel, instead of telling of shepherds and wise men, uses the analogy of light to explain what occurred. He doesn't want us to get lost in sentimentality over the inn with its manger at Bethlehem. He wants us to realize that something tremendous happened, and so he said, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." (John 1:4-5.) So it was in the

light of that star that they discovered another star—the Daystar from on high.

We in our generation are not too sure just what light is. We have theories. We have Newton's Corpuscular theory, Maxwell's electromagnetic theory, or the new quantum theory, but none of us really understands these theories. We are a little like John. We may not be able to explain what light is, but we know what it does. We know that the darkness of the world was not able to overcome the understanding of light which the Christ Child brought. Now for all time men could see clearly eternal truth.

No wonder we call the star which leads us to the manger "the star of light"! It revealed so much. Here could be found the reality of God's presence. The wise men were seeking reality. They were trying to find a God who would be more real to them than the wooden-faced idols they had previously bowed to. But they could find this God only after God first found them and met them at the deepest longing of the human soul.

Isn't it interesting to note that Jesus himself was born at night? The star is only visible at night. It was in the darkness of the night that Jesus came to

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

them. Is it not in the darkness of our nights that our Lord comes to us? ✕

Samuel Shoemaker once said that there are three levels of life—the level of instinct; the level of conscience; and the level of grace. Most of us are living on the level of conscience. Our instincts sometimes bother us, and once in a while they get out of hand. For the most part, however, we try to live as conscience says we should. This is not enough. It is certainly not enough in light of Christ's revelation. Christ came that we might be raised from the level of conscience to the level of grace. He bids us come to the point where we know that God loves and cares for us. Where God can transform our weakness into power for his good and holy purposes. This is his blessed assurance for us—wherever we are.

One day when Abraham Lincoln was worshipping in church an old man walked slowly up the aisle looking vainly for a seat. Obviously he was embarrassed by his failure to find one. Still unsuccessful, he started down the aisle toward the door. As he came abreast of Lincoln's pew the long arm of the President reached out to him and a rough voice whispered, "Come in here with me." It is

4. intuition?  
nudging of  
Holy Spirit

not wrong to say that God is doing just that through Christ. Up and down the lonely aisles of life we walk, peering into the darkness for a place where our souls can find refuge.

This season, as the star of light beckons, we behold One who said, "Come in here with me. I have in me the treasures of everlasting life, and I freely give them to all who come."

The second truth which we behold in the star of light is that Christ, coming to us as he did, enhances forever the meaning of human life. The prophet said, "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (Isa. 9:6.) But there was nothing under the star that night which indicated to these wise men anything of this kind. They simply saw a baby. What an unimpressive discovery! What an unpromising fulfillment of man's long-cherished hopes! Well might they have pondered, "Is this the end of our quest? Is the promised Deliverer for whom we have waited so long simply a child full of simplicity and weakness?"

Too often we are impressed only by earthquakes, wind, and fire—the noise, the boisterous, the big! History has revealed, however, that events too



## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

trivial or unimportant to be mentioned when they occur have actually been loaded with world-shaking possibilities. So it was with the birth of our Lord. The great event which stands like a watershed in history passed almost unnoticed. How often in our day the important things are atomic submarines, flights to the moon, guided missiles, whether we are going to break into the social column, or some event that sends news-hungry cameramen hurrying here or there to catch some shocking crime that causes newsboys to yell their heads off as though something really big had happened! This to us is important. Meanwhile, perhaps quietly and unnoticed, some baby lies in a manger—some movement, some idea, some vision that stirs men's souls and which will live on and do its creative work when the tumult and the shouting dies is beginning to grow unpublicized. (Yes, only a babe in a manger, but in the light of the star, men beheld him and caught a glimpse of the possibilities which lay before them.)

A pertinent question comes into our minds. How could one man against the world be expected to make a mark? Could I, in my hour of living, expect to make a mark on this life? Could you? God is

what makes the difference. Only you against the world? You wouldn't do much! But God in you—why, you *can* overcome the world! This is God's promise. He did not come too soon to prove the integrity of this principle to all men who are waiting to receive him—that God in man can conquer. In the light of that God darkness can be driven back. Are you bored or bewildered? You don't have to be. Life can be thrilling again, full of adventure and shining with new purpose.

Alexander Irwin, in *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*, tells of a rebellious boy in poverty-stricken Northern Ireland during the nineteenth century. Resenting restrictions in his home, he ran away one night. His saintly mother was heartbroken. The village laughed at the youngster and proclaimed that the boy was no good. But each night, though she could ill afford it, the boy's mother went through a costly ritual. She lit a stub of candle and sat by the window waiting for her boy.

Years passed. No one ever heard from the son. Now only the old-timers remembered him, and even these seldom thought of the boy. He was forgotten, except by an old mother sitting night after night by a bit of candle in the window. No one

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

knew how many meals the old lady had to forego in order to afford the unheard-of luxury of that candle each evening.

As time went on, the villagers felt only pity for the frail broken woman who night after night sat by the window. How queer she was, they thought—for they had forgotten. But a mother doesn't! How could a parent ever forget? But even her love was nothing compared with the way God remembers us, for he has lighted the windows of our homes—our lives.

In him who is the light of the world we behold One who never forgets us, who always welcomes us home. May we, like the wise men, find reality. May it be a reality which enhances the meaning of life, making real in this Advent season its astonishing possibilities.



## 2

# The Star of Hope

*"Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27.)*

Several years ago one of America's newest submarines left harbor. A mile or so out something went wrong. It "turned turtle" and sank into the mud, trapping its crew. Tugs worked feverishly to free the men below. The last message the rescuers heard from the submarine was tapped out before their oxygen failed. It was, "Is there any hope?"

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

This cry from the trapped navy men is the same cry going up from many hearts today. It would be no exaggeration to say that on every hymnbook we pick up, on every magazine we read, on every article of clothing we wear, rests a tiny particle of radioactive dust from some previous atomic blast. No wonder there is tension. No wonder people are saying, "Is there any hope?"

In *The New Yorker* not so long ago there appeared the following poem:

### THE REVISED H-BOMB INSTRUCTIONS BLUES

When you hear the sound and see the flash  
Don't duck under the nearest table,  
    'Cause there won't be any table;  
Don't pull the tablecloth over you,  
    'Cause there won't be any tablecloth;  
Don't throw yourself flat on the floor,  
    'Cause there won't be any floor;  
And don't under any circumstance try to leave the  
    city  
    'Cause there won't be any city left to leave.  
Simply pause for a moment to adjust your shroud  
And make your way leisurely to the nearest  
    cloud.

—Frances Minturn Howard

A touch of humor? Yes, but these could be cynical words—typical of people who believe there is nothing left to live for except the pleasures of the moment. But come with me now as we move under the star of Bethlehem, the star of hope, for, in contrast, we are going to discover that there is hope.

Years ago a prophet under the starry sky raised his eyes and prayed, "O God, is there hope?" And the voice of God came to him, "Yes, Micah, there is hope." "But when, and where?" cried the prophet. There came back the answer, "In Bethlehem." Micah cried, "It's one of the smaller tribes!" And again came the voice of God, "And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda, for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel." (See Matt. 2:6; Mic. 5:2.) From that moment on Bethlehem became a symbol of hope for the ancient Jews. If only God would fulfill his promise.

Christmas is almost here, and we celebrate it because God did fulfill his promise. The Bible beautifully puts it, "To whom God would make known . . . the glory of this mystery . . . which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27.) In the light of that hope we behold certain truths.

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

He came to bring us a new understanding of man himself. There is an old Chinese proverb which goes,

If there is righteousness in the heart there will be beauty in the character. If there is beauty in the character there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation there will be peace in the world.

It all goes back to whether there is righteousness in the heart, a righteousness based not on the wisdom of man, but on the redemptive act of a loving God—who opens our eyes to what we are and can become.

During a televised portion of an American Legion Convention some time ago a man stumbled up the aisle. This was not part of the script. As he came into the range of the television cameras, he suddenly cried, "Can anybody tell me who I am?"

A lot of people in our world today like to talk of who and what man is. A writer to the Editor of *The Christian Century* recently said:

Sirs: Your Philippine correspondent relates the fact that an average of 500 monkeys a month are being

sent to England and America for medical research, particularly in the manufacture of Salk vaccine. What a price the animal kingdom is made to pay to preserve the lives of humans so that they may plot the heartless slaughter of countless millions of their own kind.

There are those who go from one extreme to the other—on one hand we have the cynic, on the other hand the man who looks at life through rose-colored glasses and sees man himself as god of the universe. Yet most perceptive people recognize their need of help, though at times they confuse the authorities which direct their lives.

For the majority of people perhaps the boss, or the business, is the authority by which they live. They think that somehow this is the justification for their behavior, for what they do or do not do. You and I have heard people say, "But I have to do this in the business world or I just wouldn't survive." This is their authority, and if we question it they say, "Idealism is all right for preachers or visionaries, but people who have to foot the bills in life have to be practical." So they say, and so they believe. Yet we know this is not good. It's not good because it denies man the dignity of life. It sows certain seeds within our souls which later will



## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

be reaped. On the surface it promises success, but somehow later on that success becomes unimportant. This is a fact. Until a man finds a spiritual authority for his life it is futile—empty. If he doesn't realize it now he will realize it before he's through with this earthly life.

"Judgment Day" was the minister's theme. "Lightning will flash, rivers will overflow, flames will shoot down from the heavens, there will be storms, floods, earthquakes." He was waxing eloquent when a little girl looked up eagerly at her mother, "Mummy," she whispered, "Will we get out of school?" Child though she was, she was thinking, "What's in it for me?"

Now the wise men realized their need of an authority over and above what's in it for man, but unfortunately most of us don't. We actually feel too good for Christmas. We may not say it this way, but we are self-sufficient, not Christ-sufficient. Before Jesus came there were many sincere people who believed in God, many who wanted to live by God's laws. They enjoyed his blessings. In better moments at least they would acknowledge that they were children of God. But as time went on it became increasingly clear that what they really

wanted of God was not a Savior who would convict them of sin, redeem them from sin, and lift them to the throne of grace. No—what they really wanted was a king who by his might would undergird the kind of life they already had—who would support them in their pride, confirm them in their self-righteousness, bless them in their selfish abundance. Has this not been the downfall of God's people from the beginning of time?

Yet it need not be, for in the presence of Christ we realize just who we are, don't we? Herein lies our hope, for as we too are led by the star to the manger we cry:

Who is He, in yonder stall,  
At whose feet the shepherds fall?

And the answer comes:

'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
'Tis the Lord, the King of Glory.  
At His feet we humbly fall:  
Crown Him, crown Him Lord of all!

Jesus came also to bring to man a new understanding of God. Jesus called God "Father." In no other religion is God thought of as Father. In

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

Mohammedanism God is Creator, but he is never Father. In Buddhism God is a mind, but he never forgives. In Hinduism God is reality, but he never comes to dwell with his children. All religions have their prophets, but only Christianity has a Savior. This Savior came to show us the Father.

The wise men were wise because they knew that in the presence of their Savior they would become wiser. They knew that they were prodigals in a far country. They knew that a lost coin does not flip back into the purse by itself. They knew the fulfillment of their life lay not outside, but within the hope that God held out for them, in an understanding of God and his mind, his heart, and his purpose for life. Bethlehem was God's announcement to the world that a Shepherd was coming to seek his sheep and his warning to others to stand back, for God would claim his own, that they might know the Father.

In the light of this, what a difference it makes when we hear the words, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28.) "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Ps. 46:1.)

From this the Christian knows that he can count on the nature of God. God does not send failure, hardship, and accidents in order to get even with his children. God does not torture his children. Instead he is a healing God; he is a forgiving God; he is a loving God. We blame God for many things in our life. We blame him because we do not know him. But we can know him. There is a way.

The star in the sky—it marks the way—not only geographically but also spiritually. It was a dark night. The inn was filled to capacity. But Christmas was God's affair, and no man was going to stop it!

What about us? Do we see the star in the east? Do we come to worship him? In the light of that star we behold the world and our place in it. Do we accept the fact that the purposes of God are primary in life, not secondary? Economic systems may rise and fall. Great empires may come into being and others disappear but God's kingdom goes on. Do we realize what has been done for us, what yet can be done for us—silently without fanfare or trumpet blast?

In his book *Key Next Door*, Dr. Leslie Weatherhead tells how Edward the First surprised the

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

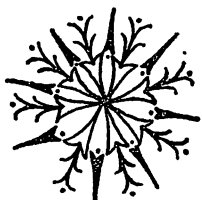
Welsh people into subjection at a very difficult moment. He secured their loyalty by promising them three things—the son of a king, who would be born in their own country and in whose character there was no flaw. He then offered them for their ruler his own son, newly born in Caernarvon Castle in Wales, and too young as yet to have committed a fault. Is this not the way God comes to us with an even more wonderful offer—his Son born in our world, in whose character throughout the centuries no one has found a flaw?

You and I may feel that there is little we can do to bring peace to an upset world—to extend God's kingdom of goodwill, but there is much we can do, and we can start by receiving graciously and completely this gift of hope which he would give to us. Christmas is infinitely more than the anniversary of a wonderful man's birth in an obscure province in a far away empire. It's more than reaching up out of the human spirit into the unknown. It is God reaching down. It is God coming down in self-disclosure that we can understand our life with God here on earth. Christmas then isn't simply something out of Charles Dickens. It isn't the welcome shouts of loved ones at the front door on holi-

days. It's not the merry laughing of little children as they dress the Christmas tree in the living room. It's not the hoarse voice of your twelve-year-old son reading " 'Twas the night before Christmas"—wonderful and precious though these things may be. It is something about God and you and your understanding of God and your life—how he came as a babe and ended his life upon a cross and then rose again so that you and I might become new people and our world might become a new world. This is the marvel, this is the miracle, this is the incredible hope of Christmas. In the light of the Star of Hope you and I can receive him and entertain him.

No ear may hear His coming,  
 But in this world of sin,  
 Where meek souls will receive Him still,  
 The dear Christ enters in.

Christ in you then becomes the hope of glory. Let us remember that, though we are lost on the mountains of temporary success or in the valleys of our momentary failures, we need not stay lost. This is the glory of the mystery. Behold the Star of Hope!



### 3

## The Star of Rejoicing

*"When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." (Matt. 2:10.)*

There is a significant fact about the wise men and the star. On coming to Jerusalem to find the King, they were for awhile without its light. Only when they came to Bethlehem did they see it again and know that they were on the right road at last. The promise of the star was about to be fulfilled.

## THE STAR OF REJOICING

It is little wonder then, that the star of Bethlehem has been the symbol of rejoicing ever since. The world had waited so long for its release from bondage. The night had been so dark. Many had given up hope. Even the wise men must have been astonished to find Jesus in so small a place as Bethlehem. The shepherds in the field also stood in simple wonder. They, too, were speechless. How could this be? The infinite had become finite. God had become man. Here was indeed Emmanuel—God with us. Was there ever such a night? They who looked upon the child could only whisper in reverence—their hearts so full of joy. The angel told them not to fear for he had good news of great joy. Then a choir of angels, not being able to contain their happiness, burst forth in joyous anthem, "Glory to God in the highest!"

That is why Christmas is one of the happiest times of the year. We express our joy in many ways. We shout to one another, "Merry Christmas!" We wrap our presents in gaily ribboned paper. Bold colored lights frame our windows, and brilliant glass balls hang upon our trees. It's a time of festivity.

But why this rejoicing over something that took



## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

place so long ago? Why, indeed! The story of his coming is the gospel—the good news. But why is it the good news? Many are the answers. First, here is the answer to man's yearning, here is the fulfillment of man's seeking. In spite of the corrosion of time and the soiling of life by man's willfulness, in spite of inhumanity and ill will, in the face of all efforts to obliterate any lasting image of friendship and goodwill, here is a message and a messenger which cannot be hidden or taken away. Here a great need is being met. Here the wise men realized that their vision, their dreams, the desires which had kept them going for the past few years, were now going to be fulfilled. Is this same desire not in all of us?

If our lives are strangely empty, if we are burdened by our sins, and if we desire forgiveness, surely the star beckons us to move toward him? We must be looking for the star and we must be anxious to see it. There must be in our hearts the same yearning and the longing of the wise men. In *Can I Know God?* W. E. Sangster related an ancient legend of the Western Isles which tells of a sea king who desired the company of a human being.

## THE STAR OF REJOICING

One day in his cavern under the sea he heard a cry—a little human cry. When he rose to the surface of the water he discovered a child in a derelict boat. Just as he was about to make for the little vessel and take the child, a rescue party intervened, and he missed his prize. But—so the legend says—as they drew away the sea king threw into the heart of the child a little sea-salt wave and said as he submerged, “The child is mine. When he grows the salt sea will call him, and he will come home to meet me at the last.” It’s only a Gaelic legend, but it enshrines the timeless truth that God has put into the heart of all of us a longing for himself. We may not understand it but it’s there.

One does not need to understand God in order to believe in him and to find fulfillment in him. Actually, we understand very few things we do. For instance, in his book, *The Nature of the Physical World*, Arthur S. Eddington wrote:

I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business. In the first place, I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank traveling at twenty miles a second around the sun. I must

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

do this while hanging from a round planet, head outward into space.

Now, when most of us walk through a doorway we don't understand what is taking place, nor do we need to know. Few of us know what electricity is about, but we use it.

If the wise men had sat down and tried to psychoanalyze their feelings about leaving home and loved ones and why they were going to wander across a wilderness in search of something higher and better, could they have understood this prompting of their hearts? I don't believe so. They gave themselves to this yearning, and in so doing they found fulfillment in their seeking.

This was more than a nodding assent to the existence of God. Through faith there was trust in him—an acceptance of his way and will. When we are willing to say with our lives, "I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24), we will be amazed by the result. Doesn't this give us cause for joy and rejoicing? You think I'm being overly optimistic at this particular point, forgetting life is difficulty, tragedy, sorrow, with not much cause for singing and rejoicing? Not at all. Our attitudes

toward sorrow which comes to us and toward the problems which confront us ought to bear testimony to the faith within us.

William Sherman, in *Pulpit Preaching*, wrote concerning Ralph Waldo Emerson:

One of the severest criticisms levelled at Emerson concerned his rock-ribbed optimism. In some writers we are brought face to face with a devastating skepticism which continually enshrouds. With Emerson it is the reverse, for his testimony is of perennial joyousness which cannot be defeated. He has been accused of seeing life in part only, and yet what one of us does not have merely a fragmentary view of life? This optimism was not the result of a life of ease, free from all burden. Plagued by tuberculosis which he called the "mouse in my chest," he knew pain. Sorrow in large measure came to him as he buried his first wife, his two talented brothers and a five-year-old son.

In Emerson there was an optimism based, not on an ignorance of the facts, but on that which bore glowing testimony to the faith which was within him. We are very, very close at this particular point to the heart of the Christian gospel itself. Here in the world we can find and grasp the message of God's redeeming grace which gives us

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

strength to triumph over our afflictions. Every Christian should have in his or her heart a song. There ought to be that sense of exhilaration which comes when one is gloriously conscious of an overcoming fact—the fact of a divine Presence in the midst of a tragic moment—in the midst of a confused world.

This does not mean that all our problems will be solved. There are occasions in almost everyone's life when inclination and obligation seem to conflict.

A Sunday-school teacher had been discussing heaven. She had tried to make it appealing and understandable, and then, with a sense of accomplishment, she asked all the members of the class who wanted to go to heaven to raise their hands. Every hand went up but one. "Don't you want to go to heaven?" she asked the little girl. "Oh, yes," the child replied, "but Mother told me to come right home after Sunday school." Even as adults we find ourselves like little children at times—confused. In the light of the star we need not be confused, however. We are not destined to arrive at some dead end, nor are we creatures subject to the rule of despair and hopelessness. In turn we are called to take our place in the endless line of

splendor which comes from God through Jesus Christ.

Gerald Kennedy, a beloved bishop of Methodism, once told of a theological student who owned a Model A Ford. It was not running well, and he had an important Saturday night date with his girl. He started early Saturday morning to work on the motor and finished just in time to take his bath and put on his best suit. But when he started his car, he found it had one speed forward and three speeds in reverse! People have a tendency to move in reverse spiritually. We even treat Christmas as if it were a time of going full speed backward to some far-away past. We get sentimental. If we only understand it properly, Christmas is a clarion call to go forward, a reminder to travel ahead, with delight in ultimate arrival. The light of the star will escort us into the harvest fields of Christian service. There it awakens us to a genuine concern for humanity that we may dwell in true brotherhood and peace. There it reveals and proclaims to all men that God is not through with us nor has he lost interest in us.

Chatting with Israel's Ben-Gurion, a man told

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

the Prime Minister it seemed a miracle that Israel had withstood the first terrible onslaught of the United Arab power. The Prime Minister replied, "It is not a miracle. Not at all. The Arabs could flee to any one of their surrounding states, but the Jews had no place to flee. For us it was simply victory or death, survive or perish."

We too know there are no hiding places, no easy road before us. We must face forward in the struggle of life, and as we go forward we can find him there. We will not be alone, for into every age Christ comes.

In our lives—shabby stables that they are—he may be cradled. He grows again, and those in whom he grows come to wisdom and stature. The blind see, the lame walk, and we being evil know now how to give good gifts. And lo, he is with us always even unto the end, as he promised he would be. The gift once given becomes the joy of all time. We discover it under the light of a star.

Many people follow stars that leave them disillusioned, but only the Bethlehem star leads us to the place where the Christ Child is. Here is the only star with enough altitude for the journey we pilgrims must go. It not only sheds light, but it

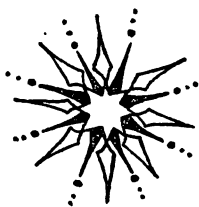
THE STAR OF REJOICING

calls for singing from within. "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

Beautiful star of promise,  
Beautiful morning star  
Beaming with joy and gladness  
Over the world afar.







## 4

# The Star of Love

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave  
his only begotten Son." (John 3:16.)*

On February 24, 1948, in Ohio, one of the most unusual operations in medical history took place. A stony sheath was removed from around the heart of a thirty-year-old man, Harry Beshara. When only a boy he had been accidentally shot with a rifle by a playmate. The bullet lodged in his heart but

amazingly did not kill him. Over a period of years a lime deposit formed over the protective coating of the heart and was beginning to strangle it. The operation involved separating the ribs, moving the left lung aside, and lifting the stony coating piece by piece—like peeling an orange. Instantly, the heart began to respond by expanding and pumping normally, and it was related that shortly after the operation the patient said, "I feel a thousand per cent better already."

Here is a parable of life. How often our hearts and souls become encrusted with the deposits of a hundred rebuffs, frustrations, and disappointments! Circumstances crowd in around us. The rush of each day's toil smothers our sensitivity to the finer things, to the things of God, and we grow weary in well doing. Gradually we become cynical, proud, or bewildered. But Christmas comes again to perform that operation which only Christmas can perform! It enables the spirit of the Christ Child to remove the so-called wrappings which choke our lives. We drop upon our knees before his manger. We breathe once more his holy purpose for us.

Now, just as a jewel is more brilliant in its proper

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

setting, so is the meaning and the message of Christmas more real to you and to me in its setting of patience and love—telling of God's purpose for us. There is a great love story in Mark 12 which is really a description of what took place at Christmas.

A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a pit for the wine press, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they wounded him in the head, and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed; and so with many others, some they beat and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son; finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." And they took him and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? (Vss. 1-9, R.S.V.)

Since the beginning of time God has invited this world back to himself. Time and time again the

world has defied the will and the purpose of God. The writer of Hebrews described it for us: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things." (1:1-2, R.S.V.)

For a moment let us look at these "ways" in which, in times past, God spoke. Clearly and vividly in the first part of the Bible we see man's initial failure. Man walks with God in the garden in the cool of the evening, and then with rebellious heart man sins and revolts. "And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." (Gen 2:9-10.)

Here is pictured Cain burying his brother Abel in a shallow grave. This is not only disobedience; this is murder. Here revealed is man's answer to God's goodness and love.

Then came Abraham and Israel—a nation which dwelt in tents. They too were recipients of God's goodness—manna in abundance. They were led by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. No father ever coddled a child with more patience and

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

love than God coddled Israel. And what was their answer? A golden calf and idle living. For sacrifices they brought sickly cattle, bread that had mildewed. Surely God's patience was running out! But he would try yet another way.

Next came the prophets—Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Hosea, Malachi. Man, though he listened for awhile, turned his back upon the prophets, and when the voice of the prophet became too insistent, man stoned him until he became hunted, haunted, hounded, living in the caves of the earth.

What, now, would God do? Would he strike man and crush him? Let us see.

In Hebrew 10, Christ is pictured as saying, "The blood of bulls and goats will not take away sin. A body thou hast prepared for me; lo, I go to do thy will." The heavens open; there is a star in the sky. Above all, this star stands for love. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The lord of the vineyard said, "I will send my son. They will reverence him." But the husbandmen of earth said among themselves, "This is the heir. Let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be

ours. Everything we see before us will belong to us." And so they killed the Son.

In no parable told by Jesus, not even in the story of the Prodigal, is the love of God in its persistence and sacrifice more poignantly revealed. The vine-dressers were guilty of an ascending series of horrors. Elijah was driven into the wilderness. Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar. John the Baptist was beheaded. When the Son came to Bethlehem, there was no room. They scoffed at him in his boyhood town of Nazareth. They scourged the King's Son. They broke him across a small wooden bar, and they cast him out into a borrowed tomb. O God, what wilt thou do with us now? What, therefore, shall the lord of the vineyard do?

At Christmastime the answer is clear to us. Out of the long-suffering of God, out of the heart of love, there comes the answer: There is nothing more he can do, nothing further than the repeated presentation of his love and his forgiveness. This is the ultimate from the heart of God, reminding us at Christmas that, though this star radiates light, hope, and joy, it is above all the star of love, from the heart of love, seeking to win men that they might participate in the love of God. In the light of this

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

star of love, what then can we do this Christmas?

First of all we can bring to our generation and to our world confidence in the loving purposes of God. This is no weak and spineless thing. It does not spend itself in vague and quieting commonplaces, nor does it exhaust itself in tarnished tinsel and the routine of the holiday season. Christ lifts our spirits above the limitations of the body by enlarging our lives and setting our hearts on things invisible until we ourselves know and become conscious of his on-going purposes in us. How we need this!

No one can live today without being aware of tension. Our radios constantly remind us of the critical nature of almost every decision that is being made among the nations or within our own hearts. We would be totally naïve if we did not face up to the fact that danger lurks everywhere around us. Yet, who more than a Christian has reason to develop a perspective, having the deep faith that God is at work perfecting his will in the world and bringing good even out of evil. Panic, tension, Communism, hydrogen bombs, missiles, hunger, revolution—these are the horrors of the twentieth century. Evil they are, and evil they will remain. Yet out

of these things God can bring good. We have his promise—if only we believe and have faith.

Some pine cones are so made by God that they cannot open and drop their seeds unless they are subject to intense heat, and therefore they do not produce unless a forest fire has come along to open them. The fire which destroys also gives new life. God makes sure that the forest will be re-seeded. Man cannot make it so, but God can, and he does so with us. Even when man has done his worst, God is the ruler yet, making his will known, undergirding it with his love. Christ, from death unto life, turned darkness into light giving meaning especially to Christmas. Thus, in the perilous days in which we are living, there is all the more reason for you and for me to exert greater effort to bring the light of his love to this world. When the world is at its worst we must be at our best. Let our gratitude speak the word of confidence that God is ruler and that there is cause for hope in the loving purposes with which he, this Christmas, embraces us.

God seeks also to exalt life's ordinary and common tasks where we are, where, in turn, we are willing to bring reverence, consecration, and insight to their performance. Have you ever noticed



## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

while reading the Bible how often God's greatest revelations of himself have been made to men as they have been engaged in some ordinary task—Moses shepherding his flock in the Midian Desert, Gideon laboring with his flail on the threshing floor, shepherds on the windswept hills beyond Bethlehem, and Mary and Joseph coming to be enrolled for taxation; and above all these deep yet simple things, the star, the angels' song, the worship of the wise men.

Surely this story is seeking to tell our hearts that God and all the meaning of life are to be found, not in abstract speculations, but where life is lived and where we bring reverence, consecration, and insight to the common experiences of life.

We think we can live by bread alone, by the essence of our own virtue, of our own ability, but there is something far deeper here. As the star calls us and beckons us along the far horizons of life, we find within us the conflict of the secondary with the essential. We spend time garnishing the frame and neglecting the real picture. We have so much that we can do without. We are so poor in what we really need, and we don't know it. The Christmas message reverses this for us.

H. G. Wells, in his story "The Pearl of Love," told of an Indian prince who was, by death, robbed of his bride, whom he loved more than life. He called the best artisan in his realm to carve an exquisite tomb as a memorial to her loveliness. The tomb soon became a shrine for pilgrims. The prince was not satisfied, however. He summoned the finest craftsmen in India to come to raise a pavilion over the tomb, which became in itself a famous monument.

As time passed, the prince felt that the beauty of this memorial did not match the greatness of his love. He sent for other artists, who built a mausoleum larger than any palace in the land. Every day the prince and the architect would pace back and forth—there was something that wasn't quite right. As the years went by he became aware of some lingering imperfection, but he could not identify it. One day, pacing the familiar galleries, he suddenly discovered what the blemish was. He called his architect and pointed down to the marble floor where the original tomb sat in its exquisite loveliness. "Remove that thing," he said.

So it is with us. How often in life we keep the wrapping and throw away the gift!

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

Now there was a day when so-called budding scientists pointed out to the Church that unless you see, touch, or taste a thing it is not real. You, therefore, cannot prove it. That day has gone, however. Our greatest scientists today acknowledge that the frontier of science in the next twenty-five years will be in the realm of the invisible.

Have they produced heat temperatures like the sun on the earth for peacetime use yet? "No," said Sir John Cockcroft, "for one reason. When they bring the heat up to a certain point they begin to lose it. Why? Because under extreme high temperatures certain impurities or imperfections in the magnetic bottle or container show up, and through these the heat escapes." "That," he stated, "is the problem scientists are working on now, to remove those impurities through which energy is escaping, so that instead of losing it this heat can be channeled into the homes and to the factories of a continent."

In a spiritual way, is this not our personal problem? We must increase our desire to remove the impurities, the blind spots—call them what you will—the sins of our souls that so easily blind us to the presence of the living God.

As God looks down upon his people at Christmastime he hears us sing of peace and goodwill. Surely it will be hollow mockery unless there is a peace on earth that begins with us, unless there is an awakened conscience which is concerned with enlarging our understanding to include others and with enlarging our desire to remove the blind spots within us and, above all, to recognize the fact that we are not alone.

In the coming of the Christ Child, heralded by his star, we behold the symbolic fact that here God has found us in the loneliness of our humanity. He has come to stay with us and to be with all frightened, discouraged, and upset hearts in this confused world—whether it is in the Congo or on an airliner; whether it is in a busy office on Bay Street, amidst the duties of your home, or in the valley of the shadow of death, it matters not. Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are, you are not alone. You are not forsaken, for he comes. He comes so that you can feel the majesty of the love of his presence. He is with us, and he is with us because he so loves the world, “that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”



## Epilogue

*"They departed into their own country  
another way." (Matt. 2:12.)*

Is this not an inevitable sequel to Christmas? Surely Christmas should mean to all of us that we go home a different way. At Bethlehem the wise men experienced something which made it impossible for them to go back and talk with the crafty Herod. They had found their hope fulfilled, and

henceforth, among the peoples of the world, they would walk filled with what radiated from the cradle at Bethlehem.

The wise men bowed themselves before the newborn child and laid their gifts at his feet. Their coming, perhaps, was quite providential. The gifts they brought no doubt saved the child's life. How else did Mary and Joseph go down to Egypt and stay so far from Herod's sword? It's a long way from Bethlehem to the "golden plains of the Pharaohs." As the wise men knelt they opened their treasures and presented gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Thus began the first of a series of startling steps which would quicken the hearts of men. Here was the recognizable moment of their highest hope—so they gave their gifts. Let us look at the gifts.

Gold—not just so many Parthian, Babylonian, or Chaldean dollars, but a symbol representing their property, goods, toil, and stress. They dedicated it to their King. Giving it meant taking it down from the shelf where many of their kind, then and today, have worshiped it as a god. They had searched its value, probed its depth, and found it wanting. Henceforth it would be used, not for self, but for mankind. They offered it in love. It was the out-

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

pouring of spiritual response to what was taking place.

Frankincense—a fragrant resin drained from the Near Eastern balsam. It was a substance precious, refined, used much in worship. Just as incense smoke rose in the air, so the inward longing of their hearts rose to meet their God. For them worship would no longer be a stretching out or a futile grasping for thin straws, useless to lean upon. No longer would their minds be drained dry from peering into this cult or that. No longer would aching hearts have to begin the search again. God's light had led them. Although they did not understand it completely as yet, their worship now at least would be God-directed and meaningful.

Myrrh—an equally precious substance used in healing—a rare gift. Not an imitation healer or a quick pain-cure, but a carefully prepared substance with powerful medicinal properties, it spoke of a cleansing, healing power, with an ability to remove as sure as a surgeon's scalpel, the disease, the worm-wood, the gall that so often rankles the human breast. Yes, the wise men, as they knelt before the cradle, offered their gifts and in so doing they received something—something which made it im-

possible for them to go back the same way, to the same old habits and beliefs. And it can be so for us.

What did it mean, this soft touch of another world on the darkness of our own? The star in the sky, the song in the air, the shepherds running down from the hills, the lowing of the animals in the stable? So many people hear of these things and put them down as commonplace. We become so familiar with this story that we no longer wonder at its mystery.

John Ruskin once wrote, "I would rather live in a cottage and wonder at everything than live in Warwick Castle and wonder at nothing." We know what he meant, don't we? One of the greatest capacities God has placed within us is the capacity to wonder. Did you ever stop to analyze what makes childhood delightful and charming? Is the secret not that children wonder about things? From wonder they begin to probe and to question things. Is this not the way of knowledge? Now, I am not suggesting that we become children, for to be childish is to be immature. We can, however, be childlike in our sensitivity to the touch of God upon us. To wonder is, as someone has said, "To live freshly in a glad, fresh world with a thousand ave-



## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

nues into everywhere, off the dull spot on which we might be standing." Surely it was Jesus himself who taught us to wonder, to be divinely discontented with the present, to be probing forever into the new and the unexpected.

We have developed the ability to wonder along certain lines, haven't we? We stand and wonder, for instance, at the advances made in science. We tour great factories. We are amazed when we see molten metal emerging twenty minutes later as utensils for the world's markets. We marvel as pictures appear on television tubes from radio waves that come through brick walls. We may even stand with delight and wonder before some gift that pleases us at Christmas.

Yet the tragedy for many people is that the season is almost over and they have felt no throbbing thrill as they beheld a babe lying on some quickly-gathered straw in a certain manger. These people haven't realized that here is the most wonderful event in the cosmic sweep of human history. He didn't enter a palace in some far-off place away from us; instead he became a babe, in poverty in a manger in a stable, with sheep and shepherds and a carpenter, and there are nails and a crib and a

cross in the picture. Think of it—the wonder of it! God has given us so many things to stir our minds, to lift our spirits to him, but our heads are often not bowed and our hearts are not hushed. We become so accustomed to it—perhaps too sophisticated.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
 We know exactly what you are;  
 Teacher told us yesterday,  
 You are eight hundred million miles away;  
 You are only a whirling mass  
 Of "C" and "N" and hydrogen gas;  
 Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
 We don't wonder what you are.

How much we know about everything, and yet how little!

Still Christmas is not complete without us. God's purpose is not fulfilled without us. Tossing these two facts around and around in our minds, we begin to wonder. Wonder leads us, just as wonder led the wise men, to ponder the meaning of something new and different—and ultimately to change.

One night after a week of great services in Leeds University, a girl said to Dr. Weatherhead, "We're

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

going to miss you, and I have a problem. I'm just about through my course, and when I get back home I know the hardest thing in my religious life will be to stick out the services in our village chapel." Then she added, "I think I shall go up into the hills or through the woods on Sunday. I shall more easily find God there, and perhaps I can remember the inspiration of this week of wonderful services."

Dr. Weatherhead reminded her that because of her training and the privilege she had had of sharing in some of the great church services of the land it was now her responsibility to go back into the service of her village and be a part of it. He pointed out that no doubt Jesus grew restless under some of the rabbis of Nazareth. Yet if others had lifted their heads during the worship and had seen his face they would surely have come again, and because Jesus was there it was easier for them to listen and to pray. The girl bowed her head at the rebuke. Then she raised it and said simply, "I'll go back, and I'll be in my place."

Some time later the minister of that church told Dr. Weatherhead that she not only came back and took her place but she had transformed that little

congregation by her spirit and presence. Yes, from time to time, especially at Christmas, God draws back the curtains of Bethlehem, and in this momentary break through the veil wise are the people who go about thinking of what they saw, and wise are the people who go home another way.

What made the wise men go home another way? Did they not find new loyalties as they knelt before the manger? At once they knew that they would have to rise above the little secret orders of Parthian worship. They were caught up in an open-hearted brotherhood of man. And the question—will the new loyalties outweigh the old—immediately raises a deeper question, Have the new loyalties worthier purposes and objectives?

This is what Jesus came to bring by his life, by his death, and by his resurrection. Today multitudes of uninformed and misinformed people are lost in the wilderness of what we might call *laissez-faire* thinking. They have forsaken the beliefs of an earlier day, and they have placed no new objectives in their places—nothing that is positive, nothing that is vital, that will fashion and shape the destiny of future generations. When confronted with some tragedy or some difficulty they fall back

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

on the impressions absorbed years and years ago. We find this reflected in editorials of local papers. We find it reflected in news columns. We find it reflected in the attitudes of people on the street.

A reporter conducting a poll for a local radio station stopped three people who said they were Christian and asked, "Do you believe there is a God?" The first one said, "Oh yes, I believe there is. But whether I have just been brought up to believe it as a child, I don't know, but I suppose I believe there is a God."

The second one said, "I have always been brought up to believe there is a God. Sometimes I wonder. I won't argue about it."

The third person said, "Well, yes, I think I believe in God. We've got to believe in something, don't we?" Is it important? Does it matter?

Such vagueness, for intelligent, mature people! They had no star to steer by, no center of thought, no incentive for action. No wonder the world is running scared at the present time. We fear failure more than we desire to really live. We have become a people who have no passionate attachment which can awaken us, kindle our imagination, and sweep us off our feet. Not so the wise men! In their new

loyalties they beheld new objectives. Now they were new men—purposeful leaders, with an inward determination to move toward these objectives. They would ever change the path they traveled.

Surely this is the story of the Christian Church from its very beginning. People coming close to Christ would always go home a different way. We think of the tax collector sitting in his customs house surrounded by his money bags. A shadow falls across his desk, and a hand is placed on his shoulder. As he looked up into the eyes of the One before him he suddenly beheld in those eyes the man God meant him to be. From that moment on Matthew walked a different path.

There was Zaccheus in the tree and Mary by the well—I could go on. It's the story of your life and mine, for Bethlehem isn't confined to one place or to a particular time, but confronts us daily with a new road whereon lies new purpose.

Several days ago we sat around the Christmas tree unwrapping our Christmas gifts. There were neckties, shirts, maybe a book or some socks. Some of them we will use, some we will exchange, some we will treasure for their sentimental value. What

## THE STARS OF CHRISTMAS

about the Christmas gifts which come to us that we do not find under that tree? The Christmas gifts we have been seeking as we have been making our way under the star of Bethlehem? The new vision, the new loyalties, the new objectives, the spirit which can make us new people—what about these gifts, what are we going to do with them?

Back in the early days of Irving Berlin's career he wrote a tune called, "The Song Is Ended, but the Melody Lingers On." Does the melody linger on? Is this not your task and mine—to make sure that that melody does linger on?

Yes—we have followed the star. It has led us to a manger and to a discovery. If we kneel in adoration our hearts too will be "strangely warmed," and the inevitable sequel to Christmas can be found in us.

The Incarnation is not merely an event which took place once in history, long ago and far away. If the religion of Jesus means anything at all, it is an experience continually reproduced in those who, like the wise men, kneel and give their treasured gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—their all.

The world is still dark and precariously poised between friendship and hate, but that hatred can

be overcome. There's a story of a song, and of a star, that haunts us still. We face it again and again wherever we go. It reminds us that if we really worship the King, his light will shine through us. It will shine in the office or the factory where we toil, in the contracts we sign. It will pierce the darkness of the world around us and bring hope, love, peace, and goodwill.

Let us continue to be part of the Christmas story, and may the radiance of Bethlehem in the days ahead flood your heart.

O Star of Bethlehem, shine on,

Shine on!

Through ages yet to be;

On mountain and on valley,

On the shore and on the sea:

Guide the pilgrim through the darkness;

Lead the troubled through the strife.

Lead on!

And shed Thy brilliancy forever,

Bringing peace, and joy, and life.

—Rene Bronner

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